

Commercial Meat Goats

I couldn't count the number of times I have read or heard the words "I want to own Boer goats".

My first response however is always the same, "Do you mean meat goats or Boer goats?" This normally elicits puzzled looks. Whilst the differences are subtle they most certainly are there.

The best meat goats are based on the Boer (rightly so) but while the fanciest show Boer may have all the desirable traits of a Boer however that alone does not necessarily mean it would be a commercially viable meat producer.

So how do you know which is which and how to choose a commercial meat goat? (I have no intention of describing a Boer goat – that is already covered in huge depth).

The two types of goats have one major thing in common, that they each **MUST** carry a great carcass, which means good conformation. For the desirable conformation you should see the breed standard, as it applies to both types of goat.

The flavour, quantity and quality of the meat will always be significantly better from a boer than meat from a dairy breed (The best beef doesn't come from a dairy cow!).

After confirmation the differences start, they can be split two ways – those things which are not necessary, and – extra things which are necessary.

It is easier to describe the things which are not necessary in a meat goat first, for starters anything which does not affect the flavour is not essential in a meat goat, so colour, horn shape, coat length, ear length, nose shape are all irrelevant. Do not reject a perfectly good goat for having a wrong coloured head. Simply don't register it as a Boer and accept that it is a meat goat.

Then the grade / percentage of does chosen is of lower importance often a cross bred doe can have what is described as hybrid vigour. What cross you choose makes a big difference to the effect it has on your carcasses, with dairy crosses often pulling the carcass down much further than the fibre crosses do. Where possible choose higher percentage crosses than 50% (or 50% crosses where they are bred out of an unregistered dam who already has high percentage).

Pure males are highly recommend (and registered) to help reduce throwbacks.

Harder to explain and actually much more significant are the extra things a meat goat does need over and above a Boer!

To be commercially viable a meat goat needs to have low input costs and high productivity!

Therefore first and foremost it must have a high kidding percentage, that is, predominantly producing two kids every year. (Three kids is not necessarily a good thing). Giving birth to two is not enough alone, they also need to raise them too.

Keeping costs to a minimum means the goats really need to be hardy enough to – at least partially – winter out, access to shelter is a must but the goats need not to be dependent on standing indoors all winter.

To this end, a goat with a longer/thicker coat than may be desirable in Show Boers is hugely beneficial.

Summering out is a given, there should be no need for meat goats to be inside in the summer, much preferring to lounge in the fields eating just the free green stuff.

Turning the adults out to grass all summer means any forage and feed used at that time of year can be dedicated to growing and finishing young stock.

Young stock should be capable of staying out all year (with field shelters).

Growth rates in young stock is relevant, however overly fast growth may not be your aim. The best taste comes from a goat around 12 months old so there really is no need for them to be finished at 6 months old. Often these excessively fast growth rates are only shown in kids born single or those fed huge quantities. Much better to get two kids even if they grow a little slower and require less input feed.

Hardiness in the stock goes hand in hand with a requirement for less feed and forage. To be commercially viable adults should only need feed for 3-4 months per year. The quantity also needs to be lower than may be fed to a pet or show goat.

Ease of kidding, milk quantity and quality plus mothering ability are essential in a commercial herd.

Whilst it is vital to assist any kidding necessary to ensure a healthy kid is born, record should be made of the need, which means any does which regularly need help can be identified and removed from the herd.

Any kid which needs bottle feeding costs way too much, if this is necessary because the mother did not have enough milk both dam and kid should be deemed inappropriate for a meat herd.

Again record mothering ability and successful growth in the kids and remove any does which do not perform to standard.

Input costs have to be considered and any does which are repeatedly ill should be removed.

With input costs in mind, size of the does should be considered too, whilst it is nice to see a gradual increase in the does size this must go hand in hand with increased profit per head.

A bigger doe may eat more feed and certainly requires higher quantities of routine medicines so there can be a risk that she has higher input costs but gives the same amount of income from her kids. Therefore giving a lower profit margin.

Health status is massively more important in a commercial herd, while high health animals may have a slightly higher price ticket to buy this is massively outweighed by the reduced costs of owning healthy animals.

Remember that a lot of the subtle illnesses cause lower productivity and often shorten a goat's working life. Whilst this lower productivity may be acceptable for a pet goat it most certainly is not for a commercial goat.

The major illnesses to watch out for are CLA, CAE and Johnes. Choose CLA free goats to ensure you do not risk carcass condemnation, find CAE accredited goats to avoid shortened productive lives and pick Johnes vaccinated stock to avoid this hugely life shortening illness.

Ensuring you don't buy in those diseases means you can keep replacement costs to a minimum, does which live a longer health life give more return over their lifetime.

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